

July 29, 1971

Dear Harold,

This is another memo on the Pentagon Papers and JFK Vietnam policy. Nothing urgent, but something you will eventually want to refer to. The more I look into the secret documents around the 11-12/63 period, the more important I think they are, and the more I wish they were complete. I have several observations to make.

In discussing the 1961 decision not to send combat troops, the NYT article says "No Presidential paper in the Pentagon record clearly details Mr. Kennedy's thinking..." (p. 108--all page references to Bantam edition). I interpret this to mean JFK's thinking throughout his admin, and not just on this one issue. This becomes important in light of other aspects of the study.

At p. 112, it is revealed that on the day the Laos Geneva accords were signed in 1962, McNamara ordered the start of planning for American withdrawal from VN. According to the article, "The Pentagon account gives no indication that this planning was personally originated by Pres. Ken or that it was ever presented to him in completed form." My inclination would be that JFK himself ordered it. The article also says, "And the analyst comments that once the political struggle began in earnest against President Diem in May 1963, this planning took on an 'absurd quality' based on 'the most Micawberesque (?) predictions' of progress." Yet it did continue and, "strangely"--as the Pentagon papers put it, a withdrawal of 1000 was made in December, "as a result of the public W.H. promise in Oct. and the power of the wheels set in motion." Also, things deteriorated so much in the last 5 months of JFK admin. that the withdrawal plans were "formally" dropped in "early 1964." As we know, they were "informally" dropped a month after the assass.

Now, despite the falsely optimistic military reports and assessments of the military situation, Kennedy could have known from the press accounts alone (which he read) that things were pretty bad. Also, the study reveals that twice in Oct., once by CIA and once by State Intelligence, Kennedy was given intelligence estimates which confirmed how badly the situation had deteriorated. (see p. 180) So, although Kennedy was not ignorant of the bad situation, he still held to the withdrawal plans, and even strengthened the position in public statements.

Knowing this plus his personal commitment to withdrawal, I am persuaded that it was Kennedy who kept the planning going and that the worsened situation was merely a further incentive to withdraw, if only for pragmatic reasons since the worse things got, the more futile the war effort became, the more obvious it was that it would be impossible for us to attain any semblance of victory there.

I am especially interested in another revelation (pp. 173-174) that at the end of 8/63 we were really left without a policy in SVN. A NSC meeting was held in JFK's absence at which a State aid urged withdrawal, but Rusk killed the idea, strongly supported by McNamara and LBJ. The minutes of this meeting are printed (pp. 202-205) I would really like to know if this guy was put up by JFK, or if there were any relation.

The Honolulu conference of 11/20/63 is put into a new light by the revelation that at it were discussed plans for more covert ops into NVN. The planning was approved by LBJ on 11/26. (p. 189) No detail is

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given, which is a disappointment.

There is an element of ambiguity with the Oct. 2 withdrawal statement, involving the exact plan by which we would be withdrawing. Here the P*nt. Paps are both informative and confusing. First I refer to the McNa-Taylor report of 10/2 of their visit to VN (p. 211) In their recommendations, they say military changes should be reviewed to "complete the military campaign" in certain areas by end 1964 and another by 65. I'll avoid comment on the wisdom of this. Quite apart from that recommendation is another: "A program be established to train Vietnamese so that essential functions now performed by U.S. military personnel can be carried out by Vietnamese by the end of 1965. It should be possible to withdraw the bulk of U.S. personnel at that time." This is followed by the suggestion that the first withdrawal of 1000 be explained as the first step in this program.

My interpretation of these recommendations is that the U.S. basis for withdrawal was independent of the military campaign and that if the campaign did not adhere to its schedule (as it could not), U.S. withdrawal would not be impeded because it was based simply on the policy that the Vietnamese would be doing what we were doing, whether or not they were succeeding.

The public statement and its forerunner--a draft in the McNa memo--tend to confirm this analysis. I have already referred to some alterations between the original draft and the released statement (see my letter of 7/20/72 which will also direct you to the public statement) McNa originally wrote that our overriding objective was "suppressing the Viet Cong insurgency as promptly as possible. (By suppressing the insurgency we mean reducing it to proportions manageable by the national security forces of the GVN, unassisted by the presence of U.S. military forces.) We believe the U.S. part of the task can be completed by the end of 1965, the terminal date which we are taking as the time objective of our counterinsurgency programs."

The public statement reads ^{in part}: "Major U.S. assistance in support of this military effort is needed only until the insurgency has been suppressed or until the national security forces of the GVN are capable of suppressing it."

"(Mc and Taylor) reported their judgement that the major part of the U.S. military task can be completed by the end of 1965..."

The ambiguity is just what was the military mission--to train the SVietnamese to take over our military functions or to stem the insurgency. If it was to do both, then which was the dominant purpose? I tend to think that, as of this policy statement, the training of Vietnamese was dominant. The alteration eliminated the original assertion that our "overriding objective" was to halt the insurgency. Also, what I quoted of the public statement seems to say that our major military assistance is now toward training the Vietnamese and will end when that is done, but if the insurgency stops before that time, then it can end sooner.

Now that I look at JFK's statements after the Oct. 2 announcement, I am convinced this is what the policy must have been. Kennedy repeated this objective in an 10/31 news conference and his strongest statement came at his last, the 11/14 conference, where he said our objective was to bring Americans out of there.

The reason this seems so important to me (other than defining JFK's policy even more clearly) ~~XXXXXX~~ involves a memo of 11/26/63 which the Times calls "Order by Johnson Reaffirming Kennedy's Policy" in VN (see pp. 232-233). Most of what the Pent. printed was its own paraphrase of the memo. That paraphrase said that the memo "reiterated the objective of withdrawing 1000 U.S. troops by the end of 1963 and ending the insurgency in I, II, and III Corps by the end of 1964 and in the Delta by the end of 1965..." The following is quoted directly from the memo: "The objectives of the U.S. with respect to the withdrawal of U.S. military personnel remain as stated in the W.H. statement of Oct. 2, 1963..."

Now, it was never clear to me that we held the objective of ending the insurgency by any certain time, although the first recommendation in the McNamara-Taylor 10/2 memo probably means that. It's just that the paraphrase does not make it clear whether we were responsible for ending the insurgency, or whether this was the ~~XXXXX~~ dominant aspect of our military aid.

Of course, I am taking these things somewhat out of context. On 11/24, as Wicker reveals, LBJ decided not to lose SVN (rivaling Hoover for the position of God). And on 12/21 it was unofficially acknowledged that the whole '65 withdrawal plan had been dropped and that our military aid was unconditionally guaranteed. Also, for the policy when JFK was alive, I have ignored his pre-October statements (esp that if more popular support is not won, the war cannot be won--9/2/63--etc.) All these must be considered together.

I have finished filing all your clippings, which I have merely assembled into file folders in chrono order. You had some separate files on peace initiatives which I mixed in since they must be viewed in the context of all the events at the time. Your files on peace marches I have kept separate, where they had previously been filed as such. What I plan to do next is massive and perhaps impossible, but I think it is the only thing to do to be able to use these files for research, esp. if other researchers in the future are to use them. I will make a chrono list of every article with some comment on subjects included (unless that is apparent from the title). I'll also number each article. Then I'll make a subject index which will contain the numbers of each article under that topic. Topics would be, e.g., Ky, Minh, bombing, defoliants, refugees, etc. If under "Refugees" I list numbers 4 and 7, then you would check on the master list to see the titles and dates of 4 and 7 and get them from the files.

Also, you have enough clippings scattered here and there from '67 for me to believe that you must have a full box of 67 clippings. What you gave me is complete from 1/64 through 12/66. And I am simply awed at the instinct of you and Lil for having begun clipping so early. You have a priceless historical record. I would like to do all I can to preserve it and make it usable. I'll soon be getting a filing cabinet to hold all the files of clippings--which will fill about 2½ drawers.

Must go. Best wishes and...peace,

David